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ABSTRACT

All societies have procedures for selecting who will occupy important positions. The use of credentials characterizes our system of social selection, and our worship of them has created the following problems: an artificial demand for education, artificial restraints to learning, the overlooking of obsolescence, generational inversion (wherein the young have an advantage over the old), artificial social classes, and the myth of the well educated nation. There are 3 basic alternatives which appear more desirable than the present system: create a genuine meritocracy that would ensure that credentials reflect abilities of all persons, at all times, and in all places; abandon the use of credentials and evaluate actual job performance; or combine the first 2 alternatives so that persons could be judged according to a wide range of accomplishments and attributes. The federal government could hasten adoption of 1 of these alternatives by considering outside regulation of social selection as well as internal reforms. (JS)

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Every society--whether pre-industrial, industrial, or post-industrial--must have some procedure or procedures for social selection, or determining who will occupy important positions.

In a simple society, there are few positions of importance and the occupants of these positions are generally determined by a single and simple criteron such as heredity. There are no requirements to be a peasant, or even an unskilled factory worker. But in a complex, interdependent, service society, there are many roles to be filled requiring a high level of skills and knowledge,and we increasingly employ--or should employ--many sophisticated measures for selecting those who will occupy such roles.

Indeed, it is important to recognize an emerging knowledge society, where the various sources of employment depending on the production and utilization of knowledge may account for one-half of the total national product by the end of this decade. To survive as such a society, we require sophisticated producers and users of information. Without such sophistication in our labor force and our citizenry, we cannot function as a society any more than the military can conduct successful operations without adequate intelligence, intelligently used. The processes of encouraging excellence, and selecting the best men and women for the broadening upper labor force increasingly becomes a fundamental concern for the public interest.

But as we move to a post-industrial society, we find many organizations and practices, established in other times for other purposes, to be

obsolete. Such obsolescence can also be found in our procedures for social selection.

The set of practices that we presently use involve credentials, examinations, accreditation, awards, patronage, nepotism,measurement of job performance, and human judgment. Each practice has been studied singly to some degree, but the entire array--or system--is seldom if ever considered. Such an overview will not be attempted here, although much could be said about the deficiencies of examinations and their contribution to unequal opportunity, or the superficial criteria for accrediting institutions that often inhibit excellence instead of promote it.

Rather, several brief comments will be addressed to our use of credentials, for it is this practice, perhaps above all others, that characterizes our system of social selection. And our worship of credentials has created numerous problems.

1. Artificial Demand for Education. The demand for credentials creates an artificial demand for the services of educating institutions. There are many who attend classes primarily for gaining a credential and not for purposes of learning. Learning may nevertheless take place, but it is forced learning, creating a distaste for the self-directed inquiry that is increasingly necessary throughout one's life. Graduate programs in education are a notable example where enhancement of professional capability is rarely an outcome and where dependencies on classrooms and programs are created.

2. Artificial Restraints to Learning. In our complex society, there is much for all of us to learn, and there are many people who wish to learn but are restrained from doing so by credentialism. Even where there is no scarcity of instructional resources or limited job opportunities, enrollment in courses and programs is restricted by using dipolmas as entry passes, rather than judging one on what he knows or is willing and able to learn.

3. Overlooking Obsolescence. Credentials do not reflect obsolescence. Our tradition of awarding diplomas dates back to a time when knowledge was relatively static and an individual could be reasonably educated for a lifetime upon leaving an institution. This is obviously not the case today, and in some areas of learning, such as engineering, an individual is considered obsolete in 5 or 10 years if he has not pursued his continuing education. Even in the liberal arts, there are many differences in the experience represented in a college diploma awarded in 1970, as opposed to one awarded in 1950 or 1930. If education is dramatically changed in forthcoming years--as advocated by many contemporary critics--the degrees awarded in the past will become even more obsolete.

Because we have yet to formally recognize the era of the decaying degree, there are many individuals who are ostensibly qualified by virtue of their diplomas, who would not measure up to contemporary standards. In this respect, the young, who are presumably up-to-date upon graduation, are at a relative disadvantage to the old.

4. Generational Inversion. The young are at an advantage over the old, however, because despite many deficiencies they are increasingly better prepared for the future, and they are given degrees that may or may not reflect their superiority over the old. In many--but certainly not all--respects, the skills and knowledge of the young are more relevant to our emerging society, and the young do not suffer from the burden of having to unlearn the old ways in order to accommodate the new. This problem of actual differences is aggravated by the false differences imposed by credentialism. The young are increasingly given degree-credit for the same learning that had not been credited in the past. Moreover, there are many older people who have acquired important knowledge and skills--through work experience, formal classes in non-degree granting educating institutions, or in self-directed learning projects--which is not reflected in degree-credit or credentials.

5. Artificial Social Classes. There is an immense variation among

institutions granting ostensibly similar diplomas, as well as among individuals within an institution who obtain the same diploma. To treat all high school graduates as possessing the same level of "education" is a convenient pseudo-egalitarian fiction encouraged by sociologists, pollsters, and employers. Rather, in the knowledge society, we are creating artificial social classes of high school graduates, college graduates, and advanced degree holders--refusing to recognize that the variation among degree-holders may be as great as the variation between degree-holders and non-degree holders. And thus, in the midst of pseudo-egalitarianism, we also have pseudo-meritocracy.

6. The Myth of the Well-Educated Nation. It is a dangerous illusion to count the growing proportion of degree-holders in our population and conclude that we are well-educated relative to the past, or even that we are over-educating as a result of unemployment among scientists. Through better formal and informal learning, we obviously know more about man, nature, and society than in the past. But "progress" related to past attainments is not an appropriate measure of what we need to know. Rather, the changing attributes of our society requires more learning and new forms of learning. If we set contemporary standards of what we should know, relative to what we actually know, we may find a growing gap between needs and attainments, and an increasingly ignorant society. This fundamental observation is inhibited by counting degree-holders and proclaiming that we are consequently well-educated.

* * * *

The six problems outlined here--artificial demand for education, artificial restraints to learning, overlooking obsolescence, generational inversion, artificial social classes, and the myth of the well-educated nation--are only suggestive of the difficulties arising from credentialism. As we evolve to a knowledge-dependent but not-yet-knowledgable society, these problems of tomorrow will be aggravated until they finally surface as serious public issues.

We could act now by informing ourselves about social selection and consciously shaping the entire system of practices to fit our national goals or we could let matters muddle along and evolve unconsciously, as in the past. But in doing so, we shall suffer severe social costs of by-passed excellence and restraints to learning. Whether or not we consciously take action, there are three basic alternatives for the future that appear more probable and desirable than the present system, which cannot survive much longer.

--A genuine meritocracy would insure that credentials reflect abilities for all persons at all places and at all times. All diplomas would be temporary and contingent on mandatory renewal examinations, and adults would necessarily be provided with every possible opportunity for continuing their learning and keeping up with the young. Changing standards of merit would insure that we no longer succumb to the myth of being well-educated.

--At the other extreme, we might virtually abandon our use of credentials and minimize the use of examinations. The need for excellence would be satisified by actual job performance. In education, for example, proven ability to facilitate learning would be the only job requirement, and, where there are many applicants for a job, selection would be made after a probation period. This alternative would be compatible with the humanistic objectives that are widely advocated for tomorrow's education--such as schools without failure, non-grading at lower levels and pass/no pass at higher levels. It would suggest that everyone is capable of learning, and that it is necessary for everyone to maximize his learning.

--The third alternative would be a complex synthesis of the first two, adhering to the principles of multiple skills, multiple measures, and multiple chances--and perhaps loosely known as a "multi-meritocracy." We would value a wide range of human attributes and a wider range of social roles than at present. Excellence as a parent, an auto mechanic, and a policeman would be valued. Accordingly, multiple measures for selection

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL SELECTION

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TRAITS \ SOCIETAL STAGE	1900 1920 1940 EARLY INDUSTRIAL	1950 1960 ADVANCED INDUSTRIAL	1970 1980 1990 2000 ? [POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY] [TECHNETRONIC SOCIETY] [SUPER-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY] [KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY] ?		
SOCIETAL CHARACTERISTICS JOB STRUCTURE	TYCOONS, BOSSES LARGELY UNSKILLED LABOR LIFELONG ROLES FAMILY ENTERPRISE	BUREAUCRATS, EXECUTIVES SKILLED LABOR; QUASI-PROFESSIONALISM SPECIALIZATION BUREAUCRACY	MULTI-SKILLED WORKERS; PROFESSIONALISM; DEMI-PROFESSIONALISM SERIAL CAREERISM; NEW CAREERS; LEARNING A LIVING; HIGH FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AD-HOCRACIES; GLOBAL CONGLOMERATES		
POLITICAL STRUCTURE	OLIGARCHY POLITICAL MACHINES	QUASI-DEMOCRACY (VARIOUS DEGREES OF PARTICIPATION) NATIONALISM	MORE PARTICIPATION BY MORE GROUPS; PLURALISM; A TRUER DEMOCRACY INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES; GLOBAL GOVERNMENT		
FAMILY	EXTENDED POST-FIGURATIVE (ELDERS PASS ON TRADITIONS)	NUCLEAR AND SEMI-EXTENDED CO-FIGURATIVE (LEARNING FROM PEERS)	A WIDE VARIETY OF FORMS: RE-EXTENDED, MODULAR (SERIAL MARRIAGE), COMMUNES PREFIGURATIVE (SHAPING AN UNKNOWN FUTURE)		
AVAILABILITY OF CULTURE	LOCAL ACCESS, LIMITED BY GEOGRAPHY AND FINANCE	NATIONAL MASS CULTURE; RADIO, TV, HOLLYWOOD	GLOBAL SUPERCULTURE (MULTIPLE FACETS, DRAWING ON ALL CULTURES) MULTI-MEDIA (GLOBAL SATELLITES, CABLE TV, CASSETTES, MICROPRINT, PICTUREPHONE, COMPUTERS, NATIONAL LIBRARY SYSTEM) TRANSIENCE, DIVERSITY, NOVELTY		
COMMUNITY	SMALL COMMUNITIES PAROCHIAL INSULATION	INDUSTRIAL CITY URBAN HEGEMONY	ECUMENOPOLIS, MEGALOPOLIS LATERAL MOBILITY BETWEEN LOCALITIES; VERTICAL MOBILITY BETWEEN LEVELS ON LOCAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTINUUM		
FUNCTIONS OF EDUCATION	DIFFERENTIAL ACCULTURATION	STRATIFICATION, SELECTION "HOLDING" THE YOUNG PROFESSIONAL AND NON-PROFESSIONAL "JOB TRAINING"	ALTERNATIVE NO. 1 IMPROVED JOB TRAINING AND SELECTION	ALTERNATIVE NO. 2 DEVELOPMENT OF ALL AS INDIVIDUAL AND CITIZEN; LEARNING HOW TO LEARN; PREPARING FOR AN UNKNOWN FUTURE	ALTERNATIVE NO. 3 HUMANISTIC AND ECONOMIC GOALS, MULTIPLE TALENTS, MULTIPLE MEASURES, AND MULTIPLE CHANCES
SOCIAL SELECTION MAJOR MECHANISMS	SOCIAL CLASS AND HORATIO ALGER VALUES	QUASI-MERITOCRACY (CREDENTIALS AND SINGLE TRAIT EXAMS) CREDENTIALISM	MERITOCRACY (MORE EMPHASIS ON BROADER EXAMS)	EGALITARIANISM (MORE EMPHASIS ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, USE OF LOTTERIES, QUOTAS)	MULTI-MERITOCRACY (EMPHASIS ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND EXCELLENCE)
USE OF CREDENTIALS	"EDUCATED ELITE" AND "UNSCHOOLED" COMMON MAN	JOB ACCESS	JOB ACCESS CERTIFIED PROFICIENCY	DE-EMPHASIS OF CREDENTIALS	MORE CREDENTIALS WITH LESS EMPHASIS
ACCESS TO JOBS	DETERMINED BY BIRTH	DETERMINED BY FORMAL EDUCATION	FORMAL EDUCATION OR EQUIVALENT INTERNAL PROMOTION	SKILL, EXPERIENCE, INTEREST JOBS FIRST; SKILLS LATER, LATERAL ENTRY	SKILL AND MORE ACCURATE CERTIFICATION
RETENTION IN JOBS	DETERMINED BY ELITE AND GOSPEL OF HARD WORK	TENURE; SENIORITY	MERIT	ROTATION; TENURE LIMITS	MERIT AND ROTATION
AWARDS FOR MERIT	CONFINED TO THE ELITE IN A FEW SELECTED ACTIVITIES	A BROADER ARRAY OF AWARDS TO A BROADER CLASS OF ELITES	A STILL BROADER ARRAY	AWARDS FOR RELATIVE ACHIEVEMENT COMBINED WITH DE-EMPHASIS	BOTH; AWARDS FOR A VARIETY OF FUNCTIONS AND ATTAINMENT LEVELS
ACCREDITATION OF EDUCATING INSTITUTIONS	LITTLE ACCREDITATION; MANY QUESTIONABLE INSTITUTIONS	WIDESPREAD ACCREDITATION ON ACCEPTABLE/NON ACCEPTABLE BASIS	VARIOUS LEVELS OF EXCELLENCE AMONG ACCEPTABLE INSTITUTIONS	A VARIETY OF ACCEPTABLE CATEGORIES	VARIOUS LEVELS OF EXCELLENCE IN EACH OF SEVERAL CATEGORIES

M. MARIEN, WORKING DRAFT, NOVEMBER 1970
EPRC, SURC

would be judiciously employed. The use of credentials and examinations would become far less rigid, while at the same time extended, through optional renewal mechanisms, to recognize problems of obsolescence. Broader definitions would be employed so that excellence and diversity might be promoted in individuals and among institutions. And, in a society where serial careers will be necessary for many, multiple opportunities for self-renewal and career choice at any age would become widespread.

* * *

How could the federal government hasten one of these alternative futures--a matter that surely would appear to be fundamentally in the national interest?

At present, there is no conscious attempt by the federal government to regulate social selection. This is curious, for the government regulates civil rights, transportation, the stock market, agricultural prices, atomic energy, the power system, the environment, the monetary system, food and drugs, labor relations, and interstate commerce--all in an attempt to balance powers in the public interest. But the government is far from uninvolved in promoting credentialism, for its hiring, funding and information collection all serve to aggravate the problems of credentialism in our ignorant society. Thus, the government could consider outside regulation, as well as internal reforms.

A wide variety of control options are possible, covering a spectrum from the laissez-faire of the present to full control of examinations, credentials, accreditation, and awards--which would be politically improbable and quite undesirable. But there are less extreme measures, such as better data collection, sponsored research, ad hoc investigation by Congressional committees or a Presidential commission, or a permanent regulatory body. Indirect measures could also be taken through reconsidering Civil Service requirements, the utilization of so-called "educational attainment" measures by the Bureau

of the Census, and the favoring of degree-granting institutions in the granting of funds and collecting of information.

It is paradoxical that, in our information-glutted society, so little is known on the total configuration of our social selection. Such a concern is not only fundamental to the future of our society, but can also yield a fresh approach to some of our educational and social problems. These comments will hopefully encourage further exploration.